Cultivating Genre Awareness in the University Writing Classroom

Emily R C Staudt | echambe5@masonlive.gmu.edu
Student, PhD in Writing and Rhetoric | George Mason University

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the genre of writing assignments reveal the way in which professors act towards students, and how they call upon students to act? How do faculty conceive of this student audience as they write their prompts? How do the assignment sheets give their audience agency? How might their negotiations with this audience be fraught with miscommunications?

ABSTRACT

As part of the WAC program's Re/V project, this research project examines assignment sheets drawn from WI courses as a genre. Several rounds of in vivo coding were used to examine the assignments and these revealed that faculty use the genre of assignment sheets to rhetorically ask students to respond in specific, explicit ways, often using negative and highly structured directions.

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE FREQUENCY

PRESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE FREQUENCY
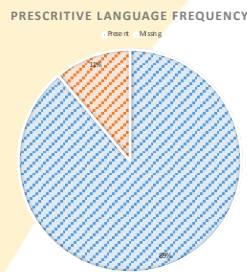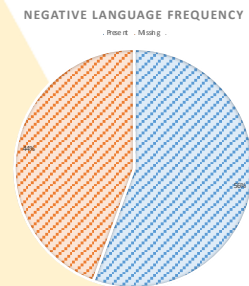
Results from Assignment Analysis

LITERATURE REVIEW

Carolyn Miller defines genre as social action, and she describes these actions as ones that take place in recurring situations (153). Building on Miller's definition and adding to Amy Devitt's historical context contribution, Anis Bawarshi argues that genres are also social negotiations (76). Though we focus on these rhetorical moves with our students, they are not always clear in the genres we write for students. Irene Clark likens writing assignments to stage directions, both of which require a performance and role playing, and she calls on professors to use genre analysis to raise their awareness of how they act towards students in their classroom texts.

EVIDENCE

Several rounds of coding were used, including two final rounds of in vivo coding, to examine the assignment sheets. As Johnny Saldana explains, in vivo coding allows researchers to build codes from the participants' language instead of using the researchers' terms (74). Overall, interview and coding data revealed faculty take great care to be as specific and direct as possible in their assignment sheets. Faculty almost always outline and prescribe specifically how students are to structure or write their assignments. They often use negative language to describe what students should and should not do. In every assignment sheet reviewed, faculty use commands to direct students in the roles they will take up as writers of these assignment sheets.

CONCLUSION

The language used on writing assignments suggests to students that there are a few, prescribed options for their written responses to assignment sheets. This language restricts and restrain students. Students are asked to perform roles with great specificity and rigidity, roles professors think will help them complete written tasks. As long argued, professors anticipate and expect deficiencies in student writing, and this is reflected in their writing of assignment sheets. This leads to a transactional view of writing, wherein professors shape writing assignments around the belief that "if I _____ (use very specific, clear language with commands, etc.), then students will be able to complete this assignment.

Groups	Code	Definition	Example
Negative language	Language of binaries	Faculty describe student writing as existing in one of two possibilities: either this or that.	"did/did not" -23 "correct" -18
	Language of lack	Faculty describe student work as lacking in some way	"Missing" -23 "Do not simply…" -35
Ownership and agency implied	Express commands	Faculty direct students specifically with respect to the content or format of their paper	"You will…your paper will" – 25
	Prescriptive language	Assignment description is very explicit, often with a breakdown of assignment by sections	"Overall, the whole assignment should not take more than 40 minutes for a student at your status." – 33

Codes and Groups from the Final Round of Coding

PRESENCE OF CODE PER INTERVIEWEE

EXPRESS COMMANDS FREQUENCY
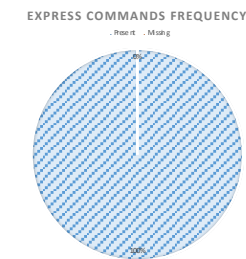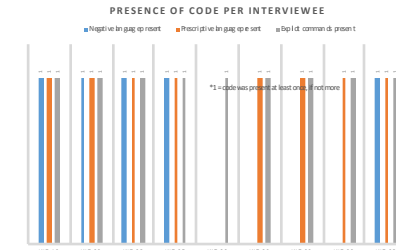
Results from Assignment Analysis

FURTHER DISCUSSION

In mentoring students into a field of study, there must be room for both exploration and clear guidelines. This data suggests faculty are erring on the side of establishing guidelines for students. Genre pedagogy suggests that students must be given opportunities to invent their role through writing, something this kind of prescriptive language denies. By being conscious of their audience as they write, professors can give greater nuance in their assignments, thus allowing students to negotiate multiple genres, audiences, and purposes in their field and to take on more of an expert role as they gain rhetorical awareness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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